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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a case study that examined parent participation at Glen Katherine Primary School (Victoria, Australia). It focuses on parent participation in and attitudes toward the Language Other Than English (LOTE)-Italian program. A cooperative-research committee composed of a school administrator, LOTE program staff, parents, and a researcher explored the satisfaction levels of parents, students, and teachers. A parent questionnaire was sent to 158 families, and 61 surveys were returned. Findings indicate that although the majority of parents expressed reasonable satisfaction with the program, a sizable minority reported a variety of criticisms. The findings also indicated a low level of parent participation in the program. Concerns about the degree of objectivity reached by a self-evaluating group are discussed. (LMI)

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Paper on Conference Theme #2- Instructional and School Processes and Their Effects:

Parent Involvement and Participation at Glen Katherine Primary School, Victoria, Australia: A Case Study

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Abstract

This case study of parent involvement and participation at Glen Katherine Primary School commences with a general description of the School, then focuses on the School's recent major evaluation of the **Language Other Than English** (LOTE)-Italian program, particularly the ways in which parents took part. This evaluation was carried out by a Committee which included parents as well as teachers and others; the evaluation surveys also covered the views of parents, in addition to those of the children and their teachers. The parent questionnaire showed **inter alia** that, while the majority of respondents appear to be reasonably satisfied with the program, a sizable minority have a variety of trenchant criticisms. Other conclusions from the research suggest a low level of parent participation in this particular case, and the need for more objectivity in evaluation procedures.

Introduction

The author was invited by Glen Katherine Primary School to participate on a Committee undertaking a major evaluation of the School's LOTE- Italian program. Glen Katherine, as one of Victoria's specially selected 'Schools of the Future' , has developed well-formulated policies and effective practices in the area of parent involvement and participation. Consequently, it was imperative that the Committee include parents in its membership, and that the survey covered parents' views as well as those of children and teachers.

Parent involvement & participation in primary schools in Victoria

One particular reason for my interest in Glen Katherine's survey especially in relation to parents, was that, for the past ten years I have taught annually a graduate research unit on the parent -school relationship. My students have researched a range of topics on the subject including suitable models, current programs, development, problems and solutions, attitudes of various groups such as parents and

teachers, effectiveness of a School Council.... It should be noted that various education theorists have specifically distinguished between the differing concepts of **involvement** and **participation**, involvement usually meaning helping, while participation is restricted to taking part in policy decision- making. Interestingly, the distinction is often ignored and sometimes difficult to apply! As will be shown in this paper, the research on parents' views which I have undertaken at Glen Katherine Primary School, appears to refer mainly to their participation in decisions about the LOTE- Italian program.

For the benefit of international colleagues and those unacquainted with the education system in Australia, it is necessary to know that each of the six states and two territories has a system which is still for the most part at least partly centralised. In the case of my home state, Victoria, it was the Education Act 1975 (amended 1984) which gave each state school the right to have some degree of self-governance *via* a School Council. This legislation required that a School Council in a primary school must have not less than half its members being parents, with the remainder being teachers. The Council's main power was over curriculum policy. This year, 1993, the proportion of parents was increased, and the parent councillors not permitted to be "currently employed as teachers". In addition, the powers of the Council were extended to being able to gain full control over finances and also the hiring of higher level staff. These 1993 changes in School Council powers, with greater local initiatives and increased participation by parents, were due primarily to a single factor; in late 1992 Victoria elected a new Coalition (conservative) government, so ending a decade of Labour (socialist) policies.

Glen Katherine Primary School

Background. The School is situated in an outer suburban Melbourne and most of its families are middle class with few newcomers to Australia. It was founded in 1986 as a result of 'active representation by a group of local parents' (Glen Katherine P. S., **Information...**, 1993, p.i). This led to the acquisition of suitable land, specifically, a

disused poultry farm. In 1987 parents also participated in the selection and appointment of the Principal, Ray Carroll, who continues today in that position. In 1988 the school opened in relocatable buildings, the School Council was selected and commenced work. The all new buildings were opened in 1990. When the school first started there were 120 children- the youngest of these children will graduate in 1994, the first to have experienced all their schooling from prep to year six there. By 1993 the number of students has grown to a total of 680.

I have supervised teacher trainees at Glen Katherine for a number of years and have always considered it a well- run and friendly school by any Metropolitan standards. This year it was selected as one of Victoria's Schools of the Future. For the benefit of those new to Victorian school conditions, the following information about these Schools should be helpful. 'The overall aim of Schools of the Future will be to provide a quality education for all students to help each student to maximise his or her potential'. (Directorate of School Education, Victoria, 1993, p.4). Each School of the Future has these major features: the curriculum includes the eight nationally agreed key subject areas (arts, English, health, LOTE, mathematics, science, social studies, technology); School Charter which includes its own vision, and a Code of Conduct; School Council with increased parent and community membership, and newly extended powers over its finances and employment of staff; principal with the role of education leader.

Role of Parents Parents' importance in relation to the School is clearly recognised in Glen Katherine and stated throughout three booklets produced in 1993 by the School, namely: **Information Booklet** (23p)- written specially " to welcome parents to the school"; **Policies** (59p); **Programs** (47p). The school's basic philosophy is evident from the following selection of quotes. 'Education is a triangle of parent, teacher and child involvement' (**Information...**, p.2) ' The participation of parents within the school at all levels of its operation enhances both student learning and school decision- making '(**Policies**, p13) 'The school has the responsibility to

and emotional needs of each student, as would a concerned parent' (**Policies**, p.20, emphasis my own).

Specific areas for parent - Glen Katherine Primary School relationships include the following:

*The Code of Behaviour requires the commitment of parents as well as children and teachers; it includes Responsibilities of Parents, listing matters such as ensuring children's punctual arrival at school, adequate sleep, homework completed, courteous conduct. A note on the Library asks parents ' to encourage regular borrowing and sharing of stories' (**Information**, p.iv). A comment on ' Your Child's School Work' urges parents to 'take time to look at your child's work when it is brought home. Find something positive to comment on and praise the efforts made' (**Information**, p.iii) ' Homework should be seen 'as a means of stimulating parental involvement with the school and the child by the sharing of knowledge and by discussion'. (**Information**, p.10) In assessing children, parents are informed that' the emphasis is on the progress of children in relation to curriculum expectations and not on making comparisons between students'(**Information**, p.5). And, when a child's misbehaviour is serious, parents are invited to the school for discussion with teacher and principal.

*Socials.

*Helping with school activities- lists of possibilities are sent to parents each February; this includes parents going on school camps.

*School Council- the Council has 6 elected parent representatives, 1 Parents & Friends Association (PFA) representative, 4 teachers, and the principal (that is, 7 parents: 5 teachers). All parents are welcome to meetings. School Council and the principal make an annual report to parents.

*Parents and Friends Association.

*Linkletter, weekly newsletter to parents.

*Community Room.

*Three parent- teacher interviews per year.

*Parents are welcome to discuss their child with principal or teacher 'any time'.

*Parents are welcome on curriculum planning and development days.

*Parents, and children, from other ethnic backgrounds are encouraged to speak about their life-style as a part of the school program.

*The LOTE statement, in particular, includes 'maximum opportunities within the LOTE program for parents to participate in their children's learning' (**Policies**, p.51); this includes a LOTE information night for parents, and weekly Italian classes for them to join.

*The After School Care Program gives priority to children whose parents are working, looking for work, studying, or single.

Such numerous varied interrelationships between schools and parents can be grouped under the following seven main headings so that one can see the general picture more clearly:

+'good' parenting in general

+parents who encourage their children in positive attitudes to school

+socials for parents & teachers

+parents who attend or help with school activities

+teacher-parent communication

+teacher & parent in-services, educational programs

+school governance

In August 1993 the principal, Ray Carroll, began planning a major evaluation of Glen Katherine's LOTE- Italian program.

This took place two months later in October, 1993. At present all the children take 2-3 hours per week of Italian. If the evaluation is favourable, the program may be extended in 1994 to eventually make Glen Katherine a fully bilingual school. A cooperative research Committee of 12 persons was appointed; it consisted of, namely, the Deputy- Principal, 4 LOTE- Italian teachers(including 1 from the neighbouring Secondary College), 2 Ministry LOTE- Italian specialists, 1 multicultural aide, 3

parents, and myself. It should be noted that half (6) of the Committee members were Italian specialists with definite vested interests in at least maintaining, if not extending, the Italian program. The aim of the evaluation was to survey the levels of satisfaction of children, parents, and teachers; most interestingly, there was no attempt to survey the children's actual achievement levels, apparently mainly due to the absence of a National Profile in Italian. I suggested that a simple test for each year level could be developed and carried out; this would have provided some minimal evidence as to what the children know, and would have been valuable in view of some parents' later claims that the children know little.

Parents were participating in three kinds of ways in the evaluation- first, there were three parents on the Committee; second, these three interviewed the children regarding their Italian classes; third, the parent questionnaire was sent to one quarter of the School's families. It was the task of surveying the parents which I was offered and accepted . It is worth noting that, in the new entrepreneurial climate in Victorian education, I as an academic representing RMIT, offered my professional services without cost, and was accepted; whereas another academic from another university wanted to charge a substantial fee, and was not accepted! No further comment is necessary!!

Recent Australian surveys of LOTE in schools

Although Foster, Lewis, and Rado (1980) included consideration of **parent** attitudes as an essential when they studied **student** attitudes towards bilingual education, there is evidently little or no reference to parents' views in a selection of recent major LOTE surveys and evaluations in Australia, namely, in Sydney (1986), Canberra (1990), and Victoria (1992). Consequently, from these three studies, there were neither models for the Glen Katherine parent questionnaire, nor possible comparisons with its findings. However, since the Canberra evaluation (1990) contains copies of both the teacher questionnaire and the student questionnaire used in its study, these would have been helpful in those areas of Glen Katherine's evaluation. It is surprising that this

particular reference, as perhaps the only one of its kind in Australia, was not brought to the Committee's attention by the Italian LOTE specialists or teachers.

The first draft of the questionnaire to parents

The first draft covered three main areas- (i) parents' knowledge in general about LOTE in the curriculum; (ii) their views on the present Glen Katherine program; and (iii) their views on how widely certain points of Glen Katherine's educational philosophy are applied by parents in their lives with their children outside Glen Katherine. The last topic is one which holds considerable interest for me and one which I would like to research further if the opportunity can be afforded. It basically concerns how far the somewhat idealistic and public culture of the school is also the culture of families in their less public lives elsewhere. This question and two others (see below) were rejected by the Committee and it is interesting to record the particulars:

* Given that there are over twenty approved LOTE and that it is impossible to please everyone, are you at least reasonably pleased with the choice of Italian? yes_ no_ undecided_

* Do you agree with the present partial bilingual program of 2-3 class hours per week? yes_ no_ undecided_

Both questions were rejected by the Committee on the grounds that the present program is 'not negotiable', too much is invested in it. The six Italian specialists and teachers were particularly vocal on this point. Interestingly, despite the way the questionnaire was worded, some determined parents voluntarily expressed their views strongly against LOTE and Italian anyway, as we shall see in the results as noted below.

* Which of these points from Glen Katherine's philosophy do you consider are followed by most Glen Katherine parents in their homes and elsewhere? Please place a check beside those which you think are usually practiced:

love of reading _

praising a child's work without comparison with another child _

equal rights for boys and girls _

self- discipline with no corporal punishment _

non- violence/ no fighting _

This question was also rejected by the Committee on the ground that it is irrelevant to LOTE, also that its last two items would unnecessarily 'stir' certain parents.

Such a reaction to open enquiry perhaps illustrates that an academic may have a different approach to an 'objective' study when compared to the approach of that of school practitioners. Undoubtedly, in the current trend to enhance closer relations between schools and universities, in Victoria and perhaps Australia, there will be other aspects of their respective positions and cultures which may have to be accommodated one to another.

The finally agreed questionnaire and results

In the end, the questionnaire was composed of ten questions which included questions on a range of points- the parents' awareness of LOTE; views as to what is being achieved through the program; long- range expectations of their children's learning; involvement in both Italian at school and elsewhere. As it developed, one aim of the questionnaire was to educate and extend parents' perspectives concerning LOTE in general and Italian in particular.

The two page questionnaire was sent, in late October, to a representative sample of just over one quarter of Glen Katherine Primary School families, that is, 145 families. However, at the last moment, the Committee was informed that the Principal added to the sample those 13 parents who have attended the Italian for parents classes, thereby weighting those surveyed by a bloc of 'backers'. Thus the total surveyed was 158. The number of returns was a total of 61 including the 13, representing over one fifth of the total, who obviously skewed the overall results. This return of 61 (or, minus the group of 13, hence 48) seems a low rate of return for this kind of parent participation; however, there are no grounds for comparison at present.

The results for each question asked in the parent questionnaire were as follow:

1. Are you aware that the Victorian Ministry of Education wants every schoo become proficient in at least one Language Other Than English [LOTE]?

Yes 51 No 10

2. Are you aware that Italian is available in certain secondary schools? (for example, St Helena Secondary College)

Yes 60 No 1

3. What expectations do you have for LOTE in your child's schooling from Prep to Year Six?

Comments

Most (39) of the respondents want their children to gain an understanding of the basics of Italian; conversation, that is , listening and speaking, are particularly stressed as desirable. As one parent expressed it, ' at 3 hours per week for seven years, I would expect my child to converse confidently with an Italian speaker'. A smaller number (10) of parents stress that the primary years of Italian should be for the fun and enjoyment of the children. Five parents expressed a variety of differing views, namely, 2 have no expectations, 1 is uncertain, 1 wants choice of an Asian LOTE, and 1 is concerned for children's greater competency in English.

What expectations...from Year Seven to Year Twelve?

A large majority (40) would expect mastery and fluency in the children by Year Twelve, presuming that the children continue till then. A small number (4) prefer their children to study an Asian language; for example, 'I question whether Italian is the right language. I would prefer an Asian Language.'

4. Are one or both parents fluent in standard Italian?

Yes 3 No 58

One 3 Both 0

5. Do you believe that there are beneficial outcomes for your child in the present program?

Check: 1-Strongly agree; 2-Agree; 3-Undecided; 4-Disagree; 5-Strongly disa

For example:	1	2	3	4	5
Knowledge of Italian language & culture	19	34	3	2	2
Increased ability in using English	9	23	18	4	5
Increased tolerance for other cultures incl. languages	23	25	6	3	2

Are there other benefits to be gained from the program?

Please comment.

Of the 15 parents who see additional benefits, most (11) mentioned the child's enjoyment and pride in learning another language; for example, 'to have gained a "second language", what a wonderful achievement.' A few of these parents consider that knowing Italian will give their children added job possibilities. A couple of parents mentioned the primary program as preparation for secondary school Italian. One parent described the importance of their child's 'knowledge and understanding of the language and culture of his forefathers which he wouldn't otherwise get'. And 1 parent wrote that 'a choice in languages, especially Asian, would have been of great benefit'.

6. In what ways have you been involved in helping with the program? Comment

Most of the 13 parents who answered this question wrote that they help their children at home, often simply by being interested in what they are learning, for example, 'we enjoy looking at children's work.' Several parents said that they have helped in the Italian class, for example, making minestrone. Others said that they have attended special occasions held at the school.

7. If you attended the Wednesday Italian classes for parents did it help your understanding of the program?

Yes 14 No 5

Comment

Several parents mentioned their enjoyment of these classes and that they appreciate the 'wonderful methods by which they (the children) are taught, ie- enthusiasm, fun, encouragement by our LOTE teachers' . Five parents wrote that they are more able to help their children as a result of attending the parent classes; ' I think more parents should be encouraged to attend whenever possible, as I feel they would benefit greatly from them.' Seven parents said that they are unable to attend the classes due to working or having younger children at home. One parent wrote that 'this question makes us as parents feel guilty- why not offer an after- hours program?'

8. In what ways do you help your child(ren) at home with Italian?

Borrowing- buying Italian materials?	**Yes 15**	**No 34**
Taking child(ren) to Italian functions	**Yes 11**	**No 39**
Watching Italian TV programs, (e.g. SBS, videos)	**Yes 9**	**No 43**
Checking Italian homework	**Yes 49**	**No 8**
Encouraging children to speak Italian	**Yes 48**	**No 8**

Comment

Of the 15 parents who commented, 3 want homework set for the children, and 2 want more materials for parents, such as copies of songs, and parental borrowing of tapes from the library. Several parents mention use of Italian at the dinner table. One parent is delighted that their child can speak with Italian friends. A few parents claim that there is no evidence of the children's learning, they would prefer an Asian language, or greater ability in English.

9. Do you see ways in which the present program can be improved?

Yes 21 **No 20**

Comment

Five parents want more Italian books and videos for children to bring home, a couple want more homework, and another couple recommend more education of the parents on the importance of the program. Two mention the 'great' Italian teachers. However, 5 consider that Italian takes too much time, especially in the prep year. Two parents claim that 'children in the upper grades have lost their enthusiasm in this program'

and 1 parent wants the school to investigate why. One parent would prefer an Asian language, another wants improved English, and yet another wants more multicultural studies.

10. Do you have any other general comments or suggestions regarding the LOTE-Italian program?

Fourteen parents are very pleased with the program, for example,

' [I] think it's fabulous that kids learn another language & learn about other countries, cultures, foods entertainment. Keep up the great work, the Italian teachers at GK should be an inspiration to the kids- I love their 'youth'- & keenness.'

Three parents mentioned the importance of LOTE in a multicultural society, for children's increased job possibilities, and for Australia in world trade. One parent wrote that 'Italian is rational language choice for GKPS + St. Helena given that it's the biggest ethnic language in NE region by far"; but the opposite view was expressed by the parent who pointed out that 'Glen Katherine chose Italian out of eight priority languages' for 'practical rather than ideological' reasons, namely, 'the association with St. Helena's program [and] the ample supply of Italian teachers'. One parent stressed the importance of educating parents regarding LOTE- Italian; and another urged that Special Needs time should withdraw children from art, not Italian.

However, 7 parents stated that too much time is spent on Italian especially in the prep year. Three parents consider that only little Italian is achieved by the children; 1 of these wrote at great length about various aspects including the following:

'the amount of resources devoted to LOTE is large and I would like to know better what is being achieved. I know what my children are receiving from the Maths program and am quite pleased with this. I do not know what is being achieved in LOTE.'

Six parents consider that there is a greater need to improve the children's English and also other subjects , for example, 'I am concerned at the number of hours given to the LOTE program. In light of the number of children needing the RIP [Reading Improvement Program], a second language is really a luxury.' A similar viewpoint stated that 'I would be more supportive of this program if more children in our school

were up to scratch with reading & writing in English.' One parent prefers an Asian language; and 1 wants parents asked which language they think would be most beneficial. (The reader will recall that this type of question was on my original questionnaire but was rejected by the Committee.)

A final comment from one couple came as follows:

'We feel the questionnaire didn't provide us with the opportunity to adequately express our feelings about the program. Many of the questions are not related to the process and outcomes of the Italian program. But rather are more concerned with the levels of our knowledge and involvement in the program.

To our minds this is not reviewing the essence of the school program.'

However, in response to this criticism, it should be noted that Question 5 did include parents' views on what they see as their children's achievements; in addition, open-ended Questions 9 and 10 allowed parents to comment on whatever they thought, including the 'process'of Italian teaching. As stated earlier, it was considered important, via Questions 1 and 2, to both inform and assess parents' awareness concerning LOTE; likewise, via Question 8, which was intended to both educate, and also assess ways in which parents help children at home. Finally, several members of the Committee wanted to know parents' expectations of LOTE. In short, the questionnaire was used by the Committee for a number of different purposes, and was considered long enough with ten items.

Conclusions

In addition to conclusions regarding this particular case of parent participation at Glen Katherine Primary School, further conclusions relate to the parents' views on the LOTE- Italian program, and to the general need for objectivity in evaluation.

1. The participation of parents on the LOTE- Italian Evaluation Committee was provided for in three ways: there were 3 parents on the Committee of 12; these parents were also the ones who interviewed the children regarding their levels of satisfaction with

the Italian program; the parent questionnaire was sent to a sample of Glen Katherine families.

2. However, at least some aspects of this participation were incomplete in the following respects: the 3 parents on the Committee were in a minority because 6 others were Italian specialists and teachers; the questions on the questionnaire were not of the decision- making type; the representative sample of parents sent the questionnaire was positively weighted by the Principal's addition of the 13 parents from the parent Italian class.

3. The 60 questionnaires returned from 160 (numbers rounded) sent out is a low rate; presumably, most parents do not want to comment on the LOTE- Italian program. This low rate is surprising in view of such factors as the shortness of the questionnaire and convenience of completing it in one's home. If this low participation is typical of Glen Katherine, a well- run, middle class school, we may wonder about more demanding levels of parent participation at Glen Katherine, and levels at other schools....

4. While a majority of the representative 50 responding families were generally satisfied with the Italian program, a minority (perhaps the enlightened minority?) had vastly differing views which they made known clearly and at length. These particularly pertinent replies included the following points:

The questionnaire to parents should have allowed parents to comment on their curriculum preferences, including alternatives of not having LOTE or having a different language; the rest of the curriculum is more important than LOTE; too much time is spent on LOTE; Italian is a wrong choice of language; the LOTE- Italian program should communicate to parents the syllabus of what children will study during the seven year program at Glen Katherine, and also the secondary years; the LOTE- Italian evaluation should have included a testing program of what the children actually know.

5. A final general conclusion from this case study concerns the degree of objectivity reached by a self- evaluating group: it seems that greater objectivity would be achieved by 'outsiders' with no vested interests.

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